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Chapter XIX.

Ceremonial games.

During my stay among the Choroti my attention was drawn to a curious game which was played in all villages in the month of March and evidently had some mystic meaning. The game later on turned out to be »international» in the Chaco, most tribes knowing it and playing it in somewhat different forms. The Choroti call it *syuke*, the Tobas *soka*, the Ashluslay *syúkak*, etc., names which are evidently nothing but different corruptions of the Quichua word *chunca*, ten. Similarly the playing terms in the Chaco are as it were international and of Quichua origin, a fact which seems to support the assumption that at any rate the principal ideas underlying the game have been borrowed from the Quichua Indians.

I have only studied this game among the *Choroti* and the description I shall give of it in the following pages refers merely to the variety of the game existing among these Indians.[1])

The dice consist of four pieces of wood, which are on one side convex, on the other side quite flat. The convex side is often ornamented with certain incised figures. (See fig. 10, a.)

The player takes two dice in each hand, throws them up smoothly against each other and allows them to fall on the ground. The position taken by the dice on the ground determines the value of the cast. The points are reckoned in the following way:

[1]) Nordenskiöld described this game in 1910 in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, but its magical or religious significance — which, of course gives it its particular interest — has entirely escaped him. This may in part be due to the fact that Nordenskiöld never saw the game played at the proper season, the beginning of the »winter», but arranged playing-parties at an other season to learn how it was played. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that many ceremonies, which are in their character magical or religious, have been misunderstood by ethnologists and regarded as purely profane entertainments.

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hard for existence. Now the game is supposed to have the effect of *increasing the fruit and making the Indians rich*. This is made possible by virtue of the fact that *among the Indians there is always someone who wins*», from whose luck all will benefit. The Indians believe that just as they can influence the course of nature, »hurry on» the growth of the crops, by beating drums, dancing, and shaking rattles, so they believe that at this critical period they can enhance the vegetative power of the useful trees and prevent starving by playing *shuke*. It seems to me probable that in this game the magical effects are produced merely by the procedure of playing — by the feverish pace at which the game goes on, and so forth — just as technique and the very rhythm play an essential part in such magical ceremonies as dancing and the beating of drums.

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That the *shuke* game, so far as its principal features are concerned, has been borrowed by the Choroti from the mountain Indians, as has been suggested even by Nordenskiöld, is a matter beyond doubt and may be inferred from the playing terms themselves which are of Quichua origin (*shuke* = *chunca*, *taura*, and probably *kima*). On the other hand, it is certain that the Incas never had an exactly similar game, and Nordenskiöld's imagination carries him too far when he tries to show that certain objects, found in archeological excavations on the mountain area of Ecuador, are nothing but counting-boards which have been used for a game more or less identical with the *shuke*. [1]) Nordenskiöld's curious idea of connecting the said mysterious objects with the *shuke* game of the Chaco Indians entirely loses its importance in the face of the fact that, as I have shown elsewhere [2]), the ancient Peruvian and Ecuadorian Indians had several »games of chance», none of which bore the slightest resemblance to the Chaco game just mentioned. The map published by the same ethnographer, showing the supposed distribution of »games of chance» in South America, was therefore decidedly prematurely drawn. [3]) The particular character of the Chaco game has obviously, in

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[1]) See his article »Spieltische aus Peru und Ecuador», in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Heft 2 u. 3. 1918, p. 169.

[2]) See my *Ceremonial Games of the South American Indians* (*Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Commentationes humanarum litterarum*, Helsingfors, 1930).

[3]) Whereas Nordenskiöld erroneously assigns the neighbourhood of Quito in Ecuador as a region where a game like the *shuke* has been practised, he knows nothing of the games of chance I have myself discovered later in that country: the *huairu* game practised in the southern and eastern mountain regions, the *huairitu* and *singu* in vogue among the forest Indians on the rivers Bobonaza and Pastaza.

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many details, been determined by local conditions, and therefore must differ from the games customary among the ancient mountain Indians. Thus all ceremonial dice games in the Inca empire seem to have been connected with the *cult of the dead*, an idea which is wholly foreign to the Chaco Indians. Further, the Incas probably knew only of *portable* playing-boards, whereas the Chaco Indians always draw the counting-board on the ground. Moreover, the latter Indians use arrows as markers, the place where the player is »drowned», is called »river», and so forth.

The Chaco Indians, in all probability, have only borrowed the leading ideas underlying the game, together with the terminology, from their neighbours in the west, and to a certain extent invented a new game, giving these borrownings an application of their own. When the primitive Indians from the interior of the country came in contact with the comparatively civilized peoples in the west, they learned to know certain games which were said to have the marvellous effect of making the fields fruitful and filling the granaries of the Indians. We may assume that it was precisely this *practical* importance of the game that impressed the mind of the primitive Indians and induced them to invent a game similar to that customary among the Incas and to ascribe to it a similar magical efficacy. But the *shuke* was not the only game which originated in this way under the influence of the Inca civilization. Various other games, both games of chance and games of skill, seem to be in vogue in the Chaco, even among tribes so distant as the Lenguas of Paraguay, but of their possible ceremonial character nothing is known. If we may trust the ethnologists who have hitherto related the customs of the Chaco tribes, the *shuke* game is the only one to which a magical significance is ascribed.

Nor does he know the *taba* game practised by the Quichua Indians all over the Bolivian mountain area. The value of »culture maps» so arbitrarily drawn seems to me most doubtful.

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